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Inmates as caregivers at Dixon prison

Unique program pairs prisoners with elderly

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DIXON – Sam Villalobos delicately lays a crocheted blanket on top of a resting elderly man before stepping out of the third-floor room.

He takes off his latex gloves and shakes the hand of a reporter who wants to talk to him. Smiling politely, he adjusts his glasses. Sure, she can interview him, he says.

They sit in a small, bright room full of chairs in the Dixon Correctional Center's geriatric wing – the kind of chairs that can be found in schools, with desks that attach at the back and wrap around the front.

“I feel like I’m in trouble in the principal’s office,” Villalobos says.

He is in trouble, but he’s not in any principal’s office. Villalobos is in prison, serving a 60-year sentence for murder.

In November 1994, Villalobos was 22 and living in Chicago when, driving with a few friends on the Dan Ryan Expressway, he fired nine shots at another man’s car. One bullet entered the left side of that man’s head, killing him.

But that’s not what this story is about.

Instead, this story is about possibility. It's about Cheryl Price, and the program that she started 17 years ago that has touched and changed the lives of so many men living in prison.

It's a hospice and adult care program, the only one of its kind, in fact, at any Illinois prison. Its caregivers, just like those receiving care, are convicted felons – inmates at the Dixon Correctional Center who took an interest in the idea that they might be able to affect some positive change in the world.



A thorough vetting

The man Villalobos helped with the blanket is one of the patients; Villalobos is his caregiver.

He's been working in the program for the past 3 years, but his first application was rejected.

"Ms. Price called me over, and I guess when I submitted the second time, the paperwork cleared with whoever had a say in it," Villalobos says. "So, they set up a time when the training session was gonna start, and that went about 7 months."

Before Price came to work at the prison, she was executive director of Hospice of the Rock River Valley. In the mid '90s, when the prison's program was beginning, she was asked to help set up its policies and procedures. She came to work full time at the Dixon prison in 1997.

Each year, about 50 men apply to be part of the highly competitive program. Only eight are accepted.

In addition to the application, there's a thorough vetting, Price explains.

"We go through a process of checking disciplinary history," she says. "We see what their crime is. We're not interested in anyone who exploits people. We check with their work sites. We check with their housing unit."

In another step, internal affairs, counselors, and wardens weigh in. The process lasts almost two months. Then, inmates that make it that far are interviewed.

"We want to know why they're interested in the program, and then, depending on their answer, maybe exploring it a little further, asking them what they know about the program," Price says. "It's more their presentation. Do they seem like someone who's able to talk to people? Do they have some insight into physical illnesses? Have they had experiences in their family? A lot of them indicate that they had someone at home at a hospice-level of care, or they'll say, 'My parents are getting older. When I get out, I want to be able to assist them.'"

If they make it past the interview, inmates go through 7 months of training and a shadowing process before they're assigned an inmate.

'A profound experience'

The connection for Villalobos was an uncle who was diagnosed as having AIDS while Villalobos was still on the streets. He watched his uncle go into a hospice care center. When he found out he might be able to provide a similar service for someone in need while in prison, Villalobos decided to apply.

“Seeing what they did for him, I figured I could do the same for somebody else,” he says. “Seeing them do something for someone they didn’t know – it’s humbling to see that. If somebody else could do that, then maybe I down the line could do something like that.”

The average age of inmates at Dixon is 42. That's about 6 years older than the average inmate in the Illinois Department of Corrections, and the Dixon average is rising. That's according to a 2013 report from the John Howard Association, a group devoted to promoting prison reform. It does yearly audits of IDOC prisons.

“The increased population and need at Dixon foreshadows a mounting crisis in correctional health care,” the report says. “Dixon’s hospice/adult-care program is a testament to the possibilities for reform where talented correctional leaders are given enough resources and flexibility to create new rehabilitative programs and innovative forms of treatment.”

John Maki, executive director of John Howard Association, is a huge supporter.

"Prisoners who participate in some kind of a hospital program recidivate at a lower rate because the experience changes them," he says. "It provides a really profound experience for inmates to help people die compassionately."

That seems to describe Villalobos' experience. Though he's now paid for doing what he once did as a volunteer, Villalobos says the money doesn't matter because of the effect the work has had on him. He'd do the work for free, he says.

In fact, his previous work assignment payed almost twice what he makes now, but this way Villalobos gets to spend more time doing something he's passionate about.

"I've learned so much about myself," he says. "I've accepted the fact that there's nothing wrong with helping somebody else. In the prison environment, there's so many stigmas – people saying, 'You're up there, and you've gotta do this and do that and you've gotta help guys in and out of the tub.' ... Guys are so self-conscious of what other people have to say as far as helping another man do things that you would never think you would have to do."

At first, Villalobos admits, he was one of those guys – slightly skeptical but also nervous about helping another man with such intimate personal tasks as getting in and out of bed, bathing, and using the restroom.

"At first it did bother me," he says. "Then seeing that some of these guys actually do appreciate it, I mean, even though they can't get it out in words or whatever, it's like that in itself is, I guess you could say, a reward enough. Because now I see that somebody

else not necessarily depends on me, but appreciates what I'm doing for them. It's a good program."

Villalobos spent 2 years as one of Price's volunteers before she approached him about a paid position.

When you begin volunteering, he explains, it starts slow.

"You're getting to pick up on what they need the most, and sometimes they're self-conscious about it, as far as them having to accept another man helping them," Villalobos says. "You grow on each other. He's gotta accept the fact that I'm coming anyway."

It's a rewarding job, he says, but there are trying moments.

One day, Villalobos was helping an older patient bathe. He died unexpectedly while Villalobos was in the room.

"Usually I would sit behind the tub and we'd be talking," he says. "But this day he went to try to get out; I tried to help him get out. But he couldn't do it, so he was like, 'OK, give me a minute.' So he sat back down, and then he just slumped over. That was my hardest day.

"Regardless of the crime that he's here for, to see him in a state of – I'm not going to say helpless – but to see somebody who needed help, that's hard. The outside perception of a criminal is, 'Oh, them guys are losers, and all they do in there is work out or watch TV.' But actually being in here and seeing that is like – whoa. It was an eye-opener."

When he's released, Villalobos hopes to continue doing similar work.

November will mark his 20th year in the DOC. He's not eligible for parole until 2024. By then, he'll have spent the majority of his life inside prison walls.

He'll be 52